Enhancing Quality Learning in a Fragile Environment- Case of the Palestinian Refugees

Theme: Formal Education

Sub-theme: Quality Issues

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INTRODUCTION

UNRWA Support to Palestinian Refugees

United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has been providing services to Palestine refugees for the last 60 years in not only relief and rehabilitation but also in development areas including health and education in five regions/fields viz. Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. This paper attempts to discuss the complexity of providing quality education in the Palestine region with different socio-political and conflict situations facing also additional problems in inter-field travel and transportation. The Agency has been adopting traditional ways of education and training through mainly face to face mode within institutional context, but lately has started working on use of information and communication technologies and other innovative practices for educating the refugee children/youth and training teachers and other support personnel. While the Programme has done fairly well in providing access to refugee children for basic education, it has not achieved in maintaining quality in its provision due to many internal and external factors affecting the Programme. This paper attempts to describe the conflict ridden and fragile environment in which the programme operates, highlights its achievement especially in almost universal access of refugee children to basic education, identifies the quality issues inherent in the system and describe the various ICT applications and other innovative practices being adopted and planned for enhancing the quality of educational provision including coverage of learners with special educational needs . Discussion will focus on how these applications are helping or expected to help in increasing access as well as enhancing quality of the education and training provisions.

UNESCO-UNRWA Education Programme

As a result of an agreement signed between UNESCO and UNRWA in 1951, UNESCO assumed the technical responsibility of the Education Programme through the secondment of a number of technical and managerial staff on a non-reimbursable loan to the Agency. Since 1995, UNESCO has been directly recruiting the Director of Education and Chief of Educationa Planning and Management and also been sponsoring some four senior-level local area staff for advise to UNRWA's Commissioner-General on all policy aspects of the operational and technical activities of the Education Programme. Thanks to the ongoing technical support from UNESCO the Education Programme of UNRWA has made significant contributions to Palestinian human development, shaping the lives, aspirations and futures of three generations of Palestine refugees. Historically, the Agency has enjoyed a reputation for innovation, dynamism and vision in its approach and commitment to education. As of 2008, there were approximately 4.7 million refugees registered with UNRWA. Almost 40% of the 4.7 million registered refugees are estimated to be children below the age of 18 Years. UNRWA has been providing education services for over 60 years.

IMPACT OF FRAGILE ENVIRONMENT

Effect of Attacks and Conflicts

While in several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia abject poverty and inequality along with impact of pandemics such as HIV/AIDS are the prime obstacles to achieving the universalisation of quality basic education without gender discrimination as envisaged by the MDGs 2 and 3 and EFA goals. But there are also countries where situations of armed conflict and insecurity with regular attacks on and threats against learners and teachers and education installations have become barriers to the right to education and a serious protection issue. One such region has been the Palestine Territory constituting Gaza and West Bank which are Occupied Palestine Territories (OPT) and the displaced refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

The short term consequence of attacks on services such as education and health are evident but rarely reported, the long-term 'psychological, financial, qualitative and ideological effects' on the education system and the development of regions and countries are barely examined at all. These attacks are not just attacks on civilians and civilian buildings, but are assaults on the right to education, including the right to good quality education. These are attacks on academic freedom, stability, development, democracy. A very recent global study on targeted political and military violence against education staff, students, teachers, union and government officials, aid workers and institutions elaborates the long terms effects of such environment on children their learning and development (Education Under Attack, 2010). "These attacks have a terrible physical effect, because they destroy human lives, buildings and spaces for safe learning," says Vernor Muñoz, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education. "But they also have a symbolic effect that is devastating in itself, and which also exacerbates the physical effect. "The symbolic effect is based on fear, on the subordination of some persons to others and the elimination of opportunities to live with dignity and freedom. Palestinian people are one such population which has been undergoing such attack and subordination for the last over 60 years and their education has been constantly and continuously affected by these conditions.

Context of Occupied Palestinian Territories

The occupation, frequent incidents of armed conflict and movement restrictions often pose serious obstacles to regular school attendance for children in the Occupied Palestine Territories of Gaza and the West Bank. In **Gaza**, conflict led to loss of life, damaged some school property, interrupted schooling and students lost many school days during the Israeli offensive in 2008-2009, and many of them also experienced post-traumatic stress. The blockade of Gaza has also affected children's education. Millions of dollars of UNRWA construction projects, including schools, remain suspended. Paper for textbooks, notebooks and chalk are often delayed for months at a time. There is a huge shortage of uniforms, school bags and school supplies. Most significantly, the blockade has left many parents unemployed, leading to further poverty and consequently hungry students in the classroom.

The situation in the **West Bank** is similar, though with some difference in scale and intensity. Checkpoints, obstacles and the Barrier hinder access to education and affect the quality of children's schooling. In response, the Agency has prolonged the school year when permitted, or provided extra classes to compensate for lost time. UNRWA has also hired teams of trauma counsellors to work with children who have been emotionally scarred by their experiences.

UNRWA's systematic and timely efforts supported by emergency funds made available by the international community often results in making sure that children are brought back to the schools. But even with these efforts, such lengthy disruptions have badly affected the quality of educational provision.

UNESCO-UNRWA EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Access to Schooling

One of the main aims of the Education Programme is to provide Palestine refugee children with appropriate knowledge and skills, in line with the Agency's commitment to Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and EFA. The Agency makes all efforts to fulfill its obligation to provide education of high quality content and delivery in accordance with the international standards and good practices, measured by the actual learning outcomes for children.

All Palestine refugee pupils registered with the Agency are thus eligible for nine to ten years of free basic education. Since the initial years of conflict , UNRWA has been the main provider of basic education to Palestine refugees. In terms of single agency managed system UNRWA, operates one of the largest school systems in the Middle East covering five countries. UNRWA's education service promotes quality education through 686 Schools served by 20,908 Education Staff. It has enrolled 481672 children enrolled in UNRWA schools, 50.07% of them are female pupils The Agency operates 285 elementary and 398 preparatory schools and 08 Secondary schools in its five fields of operation. Provision for Secondary schooling is available only at Lebanon. Gaza has the highest concentration of UNRWA schools. As a solution to provide maximum access to schooling to refugee children UNRWA operates 85% of Primary schools and 71,8% Preparatory schools on double shift basis (housing two separate administrative schools in one building, working in morning and afternoon shifts).

The elementary education provision at UNRWA comprises of 6 years of schooling for all eligible Palestine refugee children who reach the age of 5 years and 8 months at the beginning of each school year in Jordan and Lebanon and 5 years and 7 months in West Bank, Gaza and Syrian Arab Republic Fields .

UNRWA , considers the preparatory education as an integral part of the basic education cycle and thus mandates it as compulsory, open to both genders and is also offered free of charge. Students from UNRWA schools who satisfactorily complete the elementary cycle are promoted to the preparatory cycle which consists of three years in West Bank, Gaza and four years in Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon and Jordan field.

In the school year 2009/2010, the 285 UNRWA elementary schools in the Agency's five Fields of operation accommodated 317454 pupils. In the 1960s, UNRWA's school system became the first in the Middle East to achieve gender equity with 50:50 ratio enrolments of boys and girls and the trend continued through 2010. As of 2010 49.7% of enrolled pupils at the elementary level were girls. Over the past few years enrollments in UNRWA elementary cycle in general have been showing a marginal decrease by around 1%. However, the uneven distribution of change in enrollment with West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon registering negative growth (1.88, 3.65 and 2.20 per cent respectively 2008/2009) and Gaza recording an increase by (1.01%). The status remained the same as in the previous year in Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) reflects the demographic changes as one of the main reasons.

Drop-out rate in the elementary cycle was more or less stable with around 1.5% and at the preparatory cycle around 2.9% for boys and 2.31% for girls. Due to the Host Governments policy on detentions, UNRWA adopts the minimum retention policy.

Quality of Schooling

When it comes to education quality, the situation in Palestine is much more complex than the socially perceived relationship between equity and quality. The years of the Second Intifada and its aftermath have had a tremendous impact on school and family life in Palestine. Closures, curfews and other constraints on the physical mobility of both teachers and students have clearly

undermined the education fabric of the country. And this happened as the school system continued to grow in enrolments and delivery of education services. It is obvious that such conditions are bound to have adverse effect on quality of learning of children. The combination of very rapid expansion of basic education with the effects of the ongoing political conflict on the school system has lead to a widespread perception that the quality of education is declining in Palestine. If learning outcomes are taken as a measure of quality of education, one indication that can be used is the performance of Palestinian students in international and national tests.

The scores of Palestinian students in TIMSS are low by international standards and yet quite acceptable when compared with the rest of the participating countries in the MENA region. Science scores look particularly encouraging, not far from the international average and otherwise well above the scores of countries like Egypt or Tunisia. TIMSS scores in Mathematics tell a somewhat different story. There Palestine is only above Morocco, Syria and Saudi Arabia. When looking at the science results of the three different types of schools in Palestine, there is a sizeable difference between PA and UNRWA scores with regard to the small private sector (which is even above the international average score). This points to wide dispersion of student performance between schools – and probably within schools as well – but those issues require more careful analysis. Data from the three different types of schools is not available for math scores, although a similar pattern to Science scores should be expected.

The implementation of the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) baseline in May 2009 was a significant event in the history of UNRWA's Education Programme, as it marked the first time that the Agency collected comparable student achievement data from all UNRWA schools offering Grades 4 and 8. The value of this information in supporting planning, policy development and improving the Programme's effectiveness was weighed against the cost (and effort) of collecting data from a sample of schools. It was decided that the need to have a solid foundation on which to make data-driven decisions justified the decision to include all schools in the Baseline survey.

When the results of the different fields were compared it was interesting that, despite differences in socio-economic and political conditions, performance levels across the Fields were very similar in Arabic and Mathematics in Grades 4 and 8. However, within each Field there was a wide range in the performance of both students and schools. In each Field there were students who scored over 90% on the tests, and students who failed to answer any questions correctly. It is quite possible that students who performed very poorly on the tests may, if they underwent appropriate diagnostic testing, be classified as students with Special Educational Needs. If this is indeed the case, then it would suggest that these students are not being adequately supported and that more appropriate strategies need to be found to ensure that students with SEN are better supported to acquire literacy and numeracy skills.

It was also noted that there was a wide range in the mean scores obtained by individual schools in each Field, within each Field, there are high and low performing schools. It would be useful to investigate further the factors which enable some schools to be highly effective and obtain high scores, even when operating in difficult social and economic conditions. Similarly, the factors that contribute to less than optimal levels of achievement warrant further investigation – particularly to determine whether under-performance is due to systemic (common) factors or factors unique to a particular institution or context.

There was a marked difference in the performance of male and female students, with female students consistently outperforming male students. Over the last decade, under-achievement by boys has been receiving more and more policy interest across the world. This is not a phenomenon that is unique to UNRWA schools, yet it raises questions about the different ways in which the educational needs of male and female students are being served. There were no significant differences in the results of obtained by double-and single-shift schools. Similarly, there were no significant differences in the results obtained by schools which were purpose-built and those operating in rented facilities which tend to be more crowded and lack adequate space for recreation and specialised teaching facilities. Although these facilities are clearly less than
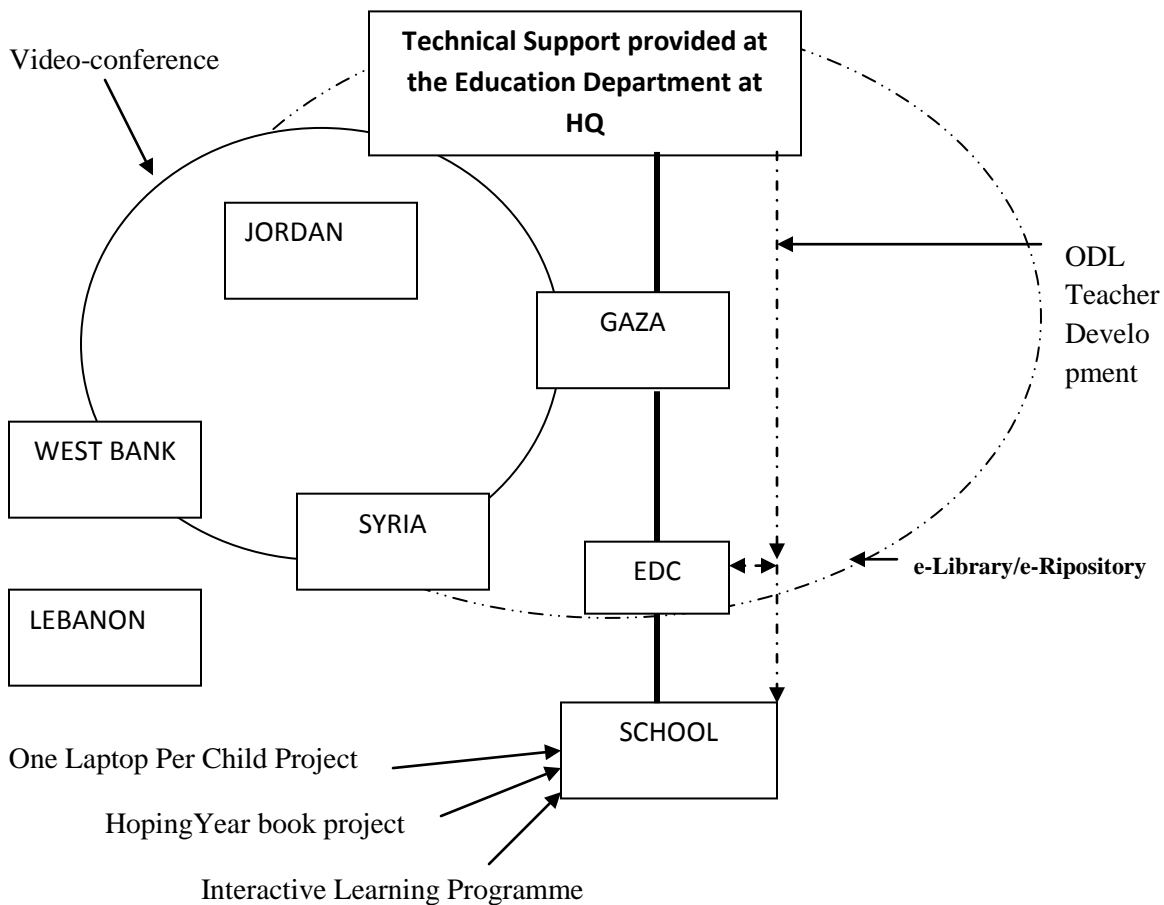
optimal in providing children with an holistic educational environment, they do not appear to be having a negative effect on their achievement, but most probably must be affecting the overall development of children.

Various external and internal factors affecting quality of education in UNRWA schools were studied by the Education Review Report (2010). The Report identified the following critical factors which affected quality and recommended that these be addressed and suitable actions be taken for quality enhancement. Some of the critical factors highlighted by the Report include teacher-centered pedagogy with insufficient active student learning, predominant concern for academic achievement with a heavy curriculum, low focus on holistic development of children, insufficient instructional time due to school closures affected by conflict or labour actions, lack of out-of-school support, large class sizes, poor pupil attendance and late arrivals, double shift, inadequate computer access and low teacher quality.

ICT/ODL INTERVENTIONS TO ENHANCE QUALITY

Figure-1 below indicates diagrammatically the ICT and ODL interventions which are being adopted and being planned to enhance quality of schooling in the UNESCO-UNRWA Education Programme.

Fig: ICT/ODL Interventions Initiated/Planned

It is evident from the factors affecting quality identified by the Education Review (2010) that the core changes that will have to happen are in the class room, school processes, school

management and teacher/school support including the change in the perception of the concept of quality, the way teachers facilitate learning and parents mind set about quality of learning. Basic changes to be brought about in countering these inherent problems in the school systems are providing ongoing support for improving quality of teachers and teaching-learning process in the class rooms, increasing learning time even outside the through self-learning materials available to children, increasing access to computer and internet there by increasing access wide variety materials including OERs and also enhance interactivity among children within and across fields. In other words what is being attempted could be seen as effective ICT integration and application of open schooling principles to formal schooling there by improving the school quality.

As the school or the education programme can do very little about changing external factors such as conflicts and disturbances, the competencies of the teachers and facilities such as enough computers, internet connectivity, electronic network of schools, variety of multimedia learning and training materials could to great extent neutrlise the time constraints and closure of schools.

CONCLUSION

There are a few project already started operation which are expected to be sustained. These include the 5000 computers provided to Gaza schools by the OLPC Foundation and school net being created for the Student Year Book Project by Hoping Foundation and the Interactive Learning programme initiated by Gaza schools. The agency has a video-conference link across fields and internet connectivity to schools is improving steadily. There is already a plan to have an e-library and e-repository of learning objects. Education Department at HQ is planning to conduct a scoping study very soon to review the ongoing projects and initiatives and infrastructure including video-conference facility and slowly improving connectivity in schools and develop a comprehensive ODL Strategy for teacher support and school empowerment.

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